

The larva of *Cactoblastis cactorum* Berg. (Pyrilidae) an example of aposematic coloration

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When *Cactoblastis cactorum* was introduced into Australia for the control of prickly-pear, birds were among the potential predators investigated. Dodd (1940), however, refers to the comparative freedom of *Cactoblastis* from attack by birds in Australia. Although many reports of such attack were received, few were substantiated. Even when starving larvae were numerous, and crawling over rotting pear and the adjacent ground, there was a striking absence of insectivorous birds. He concludes that the bright orange or orange-red and dark-banded larvae is unattractive, if not distasteful, to most Australian birds. The only species which caused any appreciable destruction of larvae was the Scrub Turkey, *Alectura lathamii*, which tore open pear segments and consumed larvae wholesale. However, because of its localised distribution, the damage caused by this bird did not seriously affect the incidence or spread of the insect.

In South Africa, where the insect was later introduced, birds were suspected of predation from the start, and many reports of such were received from farmers, but, as in Australia, none was substantiated. One report of damage to a colony of *Cactoblastis* by birds was received before any insects had been released! Pettey (1940) records various species of bird investigated; in only one, a specimen of the Wood Hoopoe, *Phoeniculus purpureus*, was a single larva of *Cactoblastis* found in the crop, while another individual of the same species was recorded with a larva in its beak. Even several examples of the Crowned Guinea-fowl, *Numida mitrata*, a species known for its insectivorous diet, collected on a hot afternoon in a locality where *Cactoblastis* larvae were particularly abundant at the time, were found to be innocent of feeding upon them, although their crops contained other species of lepidopterous larvae.

More recently, the present writer, in order to test the palatability or otherwise of *Cactoblastis* larvae, offered living specimens to a semi-tame pair of Fiscal Flycatchers, *Sigelus silens*, which he had induced to come to the hand to feed on mealworms *Tenebrio* sp. The flycatchers showed no interest in the larvae and refused to touch them. Reaction to the black and yellow larva of *Brithys pancratii* Cyr. (Noctuidae), the Crinum Borer, was similar, although the male bird pecked at one a couple of times before leaving it.

Domestic fowls also refused living examples of *Cactoblastis* larvae, as also did several species of wild birds in attendance at a bird-table. It seems evident that the larva of *Cactoblastis cactorum* is aposematically coloured and is distasteful to birds.

REFERENCES

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